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ABSTRACT

The goal of this paper is to articulate a theoretical basis for work with at-risk students and to provide a foundation for new methods for teachers who will be working with this population. The topic is narrowed to concerns related to academic achievement. There is overwhelming scientific evidence that external conditions are major antecedent settings for the at-risk condition. However, rather than focus on external factors, intrinsic factors that influence students' attribution toward learning in spite of context are examined. Learning approaches that strengthen academic self-efficacy, improve self-concept, and help students move toward a more internal locus of control provide a better platform for individuals to make lasting changes in their beliefs about learning. Moving responsibility back to students allows them to gain control over their learning and reinforces antecedents of personal agency. Learning requires a dynamic tension between conflicting ideas, yet in classrooms where the emphasis is entirely on objective meaning, students are not encouraged to relate their personal subjective understandings. Human agency and motivation, psychological constructs, cognitive theories, traditional origins of agency, and student centered leaders are examined. Contains 25 references. (JBJ)

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Rethinking Locus of Agency in the At-Risk Condition

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Rethinking Locus of Agency in the At-Risk Condition

For most of my professional life I have worked with at-risk populations: as a counselor in the North Carolina prisons while working as a VISTA volunteer; as a protective services worker for 5 years with DHS; as a teacher in a rural alternative school for 2 years; as a therapist in a sexual abuse clinic for 2 years; and finally as a counselor and teacher in an urban alternative school for 6 years.

Practice in the helping professions, to be effective in motivating change, must be able to move inside to the culture of the other and while there, listen carefully, respectfully, for the voices that will indicate the steps to be taken. A willingness of the seasoned practitioner to rely upon intuition, imagination, and practical improvisation is essential in the adventure that constitutes helping people change their lives.

All teachers and counselors who have years of experience develop practical tools and rules of thumb for their practice. For me, these practices comprise a kind of etiquette for work in the human services. They are standards - ways that I choose to approach situations - methods that I use in the classroom and in counseling to make decisions. Of these practices, many can be linked with particular teacher values and methods

for teaching at-risk students (Higgs & Franklin, 1994; Higgs & Plummer, 1995).

The goal of this paper is to articulate a theoretical basis for my work with at-risk students and to provide a foundation for new methods for teachers who will be working with this population. I will purposely narrow my topic in this paper to concerns related to academic achievement.

A General Definition

Any member of a traditional population of academic peers who is in danger of failing (for whatever reason) to meet personal goals of achievement or goals of achievement set by the institution is considered to be at-risk. This chapter considers the plight of the K-12 student.

Social Environmental Antecedents

In looking for causes of the at-risk condition in students, we discover a plethora of studies pointing to social conditions and environmental problems as sources of personal disintegration: single parent families, drug abuse, gangs, homelessness, mental illness, learning disabilities, poverty, hunger, crime, immigration stresses, and a host of factors resulting from the interplay between these and other social ills. There is overwhelming scientific evidence that external conditions are major antecedent settings for the at-risk condition. At-risk children in the

schools come from single family homes, socioeconomically distressed environments, and from socially and culturally alienated populations (U.S. GAO/HRD-94-21, 1993; U.S. GAO/HRD-93-105BR, 1993).

In the face of this compelling evidence and not necessarily contradictory to it, I will argue that the rise in student alienation from schools is only incidental to the prevailing social and environmental conditions, conditions that evolve from much broader decisions made in the political arena. The environments resulting from these political decisions, which sacrifice American cultures to market forces more than willing to forfeit moral and ethical values to improve their bottom lines, are the contexts within which students and educators must work.

Cornel West (1993) describes the destructive social effects of market strategies, intensified to "stimulate consumption, especially strategies aimed at American youth that project sexual activity as instant fulfillment and violence as the locus of machismo identity. This market activity," West contends, "has contributed greatly to the disorientation and confusion of American youth, and those with less education and fewer opportunities bear the brunt of this cultural chaos" (p. 84).

Arguments linking social context and market economic forces abound. I choose to quote Cornel West because he speaks to a broader

issue, imploring that we transcend racial and economic bias and focus on becoming a truly multicultural society. His message is loud and clear. We must continue to work in the face of the context mounted against us. There is no other way.

I will argue that foundations of the at-risk condition are largely thought to be external social and environmental conditions because this is where we are compelled to look for causes. The glaring social and economic contexts of the majority of students susceptible to school failure present such an imposing picture that we are naturally drawn to these contexts in search of answers. I believe there are other places to look for solutions. The approach I will suggest in this essay leads to one of those other places.

While the undeniable social and environmental contexts are crucial and over-arching dimensions of the problem associated with the at-risk condition, my experience has shown that many students from within these contexts are resilient and are able to transcend the debilitating influences. As a result, I have chosen to explore the literature pertaining to psychological differences between students at-risk and their not-at-risk peers. My search is for intrinsic factors that influence students' attribution toward learning in spite of context.

The goal of this exercise is to articulate a theory that supports practices that build students' life-long self-efficacy for learning. Efforts to build and facilitate the growth of intrinsic motivation have greater long-term effectiveness and more power to help students overcome their at-risk status than does attempting to change their external conditions. To the benefit of school systems, it may turn out that methods based on this approach are more cost effective. Learning approaches that strengthen academic self-efficacy, improve self-concept, and help students move toward a more internal locus of control provide a better platform for individuals to make lasting changes in their beliefs about learning. Moving responsibility back to students allows them to gain control over their learning and reinforces antecedents of personal agency.

These statements may seem like foregone conclusions, but the reality is, many teaching approaches in use today rely on authoritarian methods that treat students like passive, hollow vessels to be filled with a quantity of objective facts. Didactic approaches do not consider the mind of the student as possessing a unique potential to transform knowledge through interaction with the content.

An Age-Old Paradox

That subjective realities confound objective explanations is not a new dilemma. The early (circa 475 BC) Greek philosophers Parmenides and Heraclitus debated similar fundamental questions (Wheelwright, 1966). Are all objective meanings founded on a principle, ex nihilo nihil fit - that nothing comes from nothing? Parmenides' logical assertion, that being cannot arise from not-being, set the stage for the quantitative study of existence - empiricism, and ultimately, 2400 years later, behavioral science. But Heraclitus, acting remarkably like a phenomenologist, argued that, in spite of the desire to hammer down a logical plank, individual realities change. In fact, he asserted, the only constant is change.

This early confrontation between early positivist logic and the undeniable reality of qualitative change mirrors a necessary paradoxical theme that, I believe, is what keeps education vital and dynamic. When the balance is upset and either of these positions holds sway for too long, education loses integrity and vitality. When this kind of paralysis occurs in education, large numbers of potential learners become alienated from schools. The need to keep education dynamic is obvious. Learning requires a dynamic tension between conflicting ideas.

The cognitive dissonance created by challenges between what one believes to be fact and conflicting reality is a major source of learning motivation. Active learning, therefore, does not occur in a totally secure environment, hence the challenge to teachers of some at-risk children - particularly those with serious emotional disturbances, victims of abuse, neglect, and extreme poverty, whose need for basic safety, nourishment, and continuity must be met before they can weather challenges to their beliefs.

But a larger group of so-called at-risk students are, by default, created by the school system's unwillingness to embrace the changing culture. The inability of the schools to invoke students' subjective meanings and to listen and respond to the community creates a population that chooses not to adapt and is therefore disconnected from school. In classrooms where the emphasis is entirely on objective meaning, students are not encouraged to relate their personal subjective understandings. As Foster and Grant (1984) contend, "To strip subjective meaning away from lesson content is to fragment, fracture, and strip away essential parts of the reality of anything we teach. Given the frequency with which subjective meaning is ignored, is there any wonder that many

students graduate from schools without really knowing or caring about science or history or art, or about anything 'taught in schools?'" (p. 302).

Can we teach "facts" derived through quantitative means and still invoke student participation in a process of discovery? Of course we can, and good teachers do. Good education requires that we include ideas contrary to the status quo and conflicting with the norms. By reaching into the student experience, we will find these contradictions and they will become the inspiration for thoughtful consideration of the "facts." Students change and the culture of learning changes. If we are sensitive to this, as Heraclitus was, we might remain flexible and recognize the potential for students' subjective cultural experiences to contribute to the learning process.

An Intrinsic Focus

Shifting our attention several thousand years, from the pre-Socratic dialogue about meaning, to the present, we encounter the cognitive theorists who believe it is students' thoughts about their ability to learn that are most important. The cognitive theorists examine psychological constructs to discover students' relationships to learning. Cognitive scientists believe that students can be empowered to learn if you change the beliefs they have about their ability to learn.

The concept of intrinsic motivation has received a fair amount of attention in the scientific literature, but practical applications and classroom conditions that specifically build antecedents are not common enough in the modern classroom. If this were not true, there would be more evidence of student-driven learning. Self-concept, self-efficacy, responsibility, and intrinsic motivation are in danger of being undermined in students if the locus of meaning in education continues to mirror extrinsic purposes. Students are alienated from the classroom where they are told that the content and the product are more important than they are, where the test scores are what matter, and where the value of students is measured by standards to which they cannot relate.

If meaning in education only relates to the external arena, and the locus of all value in our culture is wealth and power, there is a subsequent undermining of intrinsic purpose and integrity. Students at-risk lose heart and give up in the face of an ultimately fruitless competition. The meaning of the problem lies in the context of a culture that places emphasis on the external pursuit of capital and power. But the problem substance resides in the unwillingness of educators to recognize and stop repeating the "facts" perpetrated and perpetuated by externally oriented market forces adept at manipulating both objective and subjective meanings.

As educators, conditioned by quantitative methods to look at numbers for truth and meaning, we develop a habit of assuming that reinforcing stimuli are largely external and we build teaching and assessment models based on this belief. Consequently, we drift away from what we know to be true - that students who prevail under conditions we predict will create failure, do so because they possess an inherent quality of self that allows them to transcend a belief that quantities determine the value of their actions. This inherent tendency, the same potentiality described by Aristotle (Wheelwright, 1966), is what Deci and Ryan (1985) call agency.

Agency is the knowledge that one has the ability to originate and control behavior, to understand and assimilate incidents, and to develop a feeling of personal competence and a sense of personal control. This view of people suggests that motivation is inherent and is a natural tendency that should be drawn from within students instead of taught to students. In spite of the fact that we all know students who possess this sense of personal agency and who survive conditions that predict failure, we have not put enough study into the characteristics that motivate them to prevail. If we pay more attention to this remarkable tendency of all humans, we might develop a general theoretical model for applications

that builds on students' natural motivation instead of sanctioning a social environmental excuse and further undermining hope.

There are several modern theories that provide foundations for the concept of human agency and motivation. The cognitive perspective (Bandura, 1989; Dweck, 1986; Eccles, 1983; Harter, 1988; & Weiner, 1990) holds that students are motivated more by a tendency toward cognitive equilibrium and competence than by external reinforcements. White (1959) suggests that students explore, learn, and enjoy learning for its own sake, not contingent on external reinforcement. In the cognitive view, intrinsic factors are more important over time.

Weiner's (1976) attribution theory suggests that students' attributions of success and failure are more responsible for their actual successes and failures than their ability. That some students underachieve and others overachieve would seem to support this view. If these cognitive views hold true across populations, then how can these factors be addressed in the classroom? A brief look at some of the findings on differences in cognitive constructs that correlate to academic achievement may provide some answers.

Psychological Constructs

The literature indicates that, as a group, at-risk students are likely to have a history of unexcused absences from school. Their academic performance is much below average, and they display behavior that often results in disciplinary action (Nunn & Parish, 1992). Students who meet one or more of the above conditions have a significantly higher external locus of control (Hahn, 1987; Mills, Dunham, & Alpert, 1988; Payne & Payne, 1989). That is, they have a tendency to believe that forces outside of themselves have a greater control over their life. Unlike their not-at-risk peers, they believe personal behavior has little to do with success or failure. If you asked typical at-risk students what enabled them to make an A on a test, they would say, "it was luck." If you asked the same question to a student who is not at-risk, he or she would say, "I studied."

We know that motivation to achieve is influenced by a number of factors both intrinsic in the learner and in the learner's environment. Various studies of characteristics of students with different levels of achievement motivation have isolated some psychological constructs that predict achievement with reasonable accuracy. The construct of locus of control measures a student's attribution of personal control in various dimensions, one of which is academic achievement. The construct of self-

concept measures the quality of students' beliefs about themselves. At-risk students, in addition to higher external locus of control, also suffer from a less resilient self-concept (McCombs & Whisler, 1989). Students who have a poor self-concept do not feel connected to their community. They are confused about their identity and feel powerless to change their conditions (Coopersmith, 1981). Finally, students who are at-risk do not respond as well as their peers to the traditional teaching methods that require substantial achievement motivation and a higher self-efficacy for learning (Carbo & Hodges, 1988). Students who lack the belief that they can succeed academically are much less likely to keep trying or to use new strategies when they fail.

As a result of these psychological differences, the at-risk student in a traditional classroom is more likely to be distressed by feelings of powerlessness and personal incompetence. The classroom is a place that is frightening and degrading to many at-risk students, who prefer more informal and nontraditional approaches to learning. Clearly then, students who fail are undermined by a lack of agency. The task of teachers, therefore, is to structure teaching and learning environments that build agency in students.

Traditional Origins

What are the origins of agency? Studies of motivation in humans have described two major arenas, intrinsic and extrinsic. The primary focus of most traditional approaches to changing the behavior of at-risk students has been to change external conditions and use external forces tc motivate students who are not achieving. The use of fear to motivate students has always been and continues to be a widespread practice. That paddling of students is less acceptable in some communities is a move in the right direction, but the attitude that it is all right to hit a child who is not doing what the teacher expects still prevails in many homes and schools.

Many of the current approaches designed to deal with at-risk students rely on behavior management models. In my view this has evolved because at-risk students display a higher percentage of unacceptable behaviors in the school setting than their not-at-risk peers. If they are to be served, efforts to change or modify their behavior become a priority. Paradoxical to their intent, some of the behavior modification programs are in danger of reinforcing a dependent, externally oriented population of students who become further alienated wards of the state with no familiarity with intrinsic hope. Their lot is to be passed from

agency to agency or onto the streets where they eventually enter a correctional institution with a revolving door. In addition, the school systems' unwillingness to risk treating root causes of the at-risk condition prevents development of effective programs. These rigid policies compound hardships for all concerned - teachers, parents, children, administrators, and support personnel, ultimately causing enormous expense to society.

Attempts to build models that work in controlling antisocial behavior and at the same time provide an environment suitable for learning for all children has presented a major challenge to teachers and administrators since the advent of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (PL 99-457), a law designed to force systems to do what they should have been doing long ago.

As suggested above, methods that rely on the use of external enforcement, while appearing to have immediate positive outcomes, have met with limited long-term success. The road that has led to the current crisis concerning meeting the needs of at-risk students began, in my opinion, with the closing of the schools to subjective meaning and the loss of willingness to entertain and debate changes in the qualitative dimensions. In a culture driven by external market forces, the erosion of

schools by factors in harmony with these competitive forces puts a significant portion of the population at-risk.

Teaching practices that recognize the integrity of the individual student are philosophically different from models holding that students are to be filled with facts and that learning is the ability to regurgitate what you have been force fed. In my opinion, students are alienated from schools in which methods of teaching do not allow student participation and are not relevant to students' personal interests.

Student-Centered Leaders

In Knoxville, a pioneer in the movement toward student-centered learning was Dr. Mildred Doyle. Her foresight, in providing students at-risk of dropping out, with a meaningful and supportive environment, demonstrated an understanding and commitment to a practice of culturally relevant education.

A leader in the movement toward student-centered education Dr. Jerome Morton, has put Dr. Doyle's ideas into practice. He directed an alternative school, established by Doyle, in which he first empowered the faculty and staff, who in turn empowered the students to wake up their intrinsic sense of honor and nobility, allowing them to form a healthy self-concept, an internal locus of control, and ultimately a positive self-efficacy

for achievement. It was the affirmation of their subjective meanings that changed the children's views of themselves, resulting in changed attitudes and ultimately demonstrated successes. Outside of the school, the social and environmental conditions, for most of these students, remained the same.

In many instances the existing school system appears to resist these student-honoring approaches, but the effects of leaders like Doyle and Morton can be seen in the development of revolutionary practices carried out in new alternative settings across the country. Unless educational systems can re-orient practices to respect the needs for participation and tolerance for subjective meanings of the learning population, then it is not only the students who are at-risk but the culture itself.

Other teachers, like internationally known Paulo Freire and Myles Horton, suggest a similar, emically founded theoretical base for the empowerment of learners. Freire (Horton & Freire, 1990) related his views in a discussion with Horton:

> I began to discover that one of the main reasons why the students could learn with me and liked my class was that I respected them,

> no matter their age. I respected their mistakes, their errors, and their knowledge (p. 61)

If we look at the way Freire communicates here, we can see his motives are genuine. He feels that his students learn with him, not, from him or because of him. Freire positions himself with the student, not above or apart.

The use of authoritative instead of authoritarian methods is well documented as being more effective (Jago & Vroom, 1982; Lewin et al., 1939), but in practice this seems to be difficult for a people indoctrinated to a view of oppression/oppressor relationships. My experience with at-risk populations has taught me that people who are powerless will be punished, if only by virtue of the fact that they are powerless to prevent it, and efforts to provide programs that build on and honor their intrinsic value as humans will be achieved only with a fight.

Conclusion

When students are no longer alienated, they become learners, taking responsibility for their own growth and contributing to the learning of those around them. It has been the thesis of this paper that the focus on alleviating the at-risk condition should be tied to an intrinsic orientation

to motivation. The benefits of this approach to learning have been well documented using quantitative methods by cognitive theorists. We might also look to critical social theory to provide an argument for learner empowerment and emancipation. Shifting the locus of agency from external to internal will give power back to the learner and meaning back to education.

We must not make the mistake, however, of assuming that agency alone will form the basis of a movement to rise above intolerable social and environmental conditions. As Cornel West (1993) has amply argued, the notion of agency has become a tool used by conservative constructionists to throw competition back in the face of the majority who do not have a chance to compete. The conception of agency intended here is not one that focuses all intrinsic forces against the competition but one that makes a connection between empowerment, identity, and the fabric of meaning.

In my view, the children who are "at-risk" in the schools are actually our saviors. Their alienation is symptomatic of a disease rampant in the society. Possessing a creative bent representative of what is most important in humanity, they do not compromise and so become martyrs, sacrificed by a repressive regime of boredom, force fed a diet of objective

content devoid of the spice of subjective meaning. The creative children, those least able to adapt to repressive policies, are the indicators of the systems' dysfunction. Student-centered thinking asks what the school can do to honor these students' vision, not what these students can do to adapt to the school culture.

I began this essay with the goal of building a theoretical basis for practices based on findings from psychological antecedents of academic achievement motivation. After examining a few studies that suggest students at-risk are psychologically different and after looking at those psychological factors, I began to see that a theory must be developed that taps into the intrinsic motivation of learners from all walks of life. I wanted to find the common factors that would motivate students no matter who they were and where they come from. I began to see the need to study students from diverse cultures in order to find the common antecedents, not just the quantitatively derived psychological constructs of locus of control, self-efficacy, self-concept, and esteem, but other ways of knowing from themes derived from narratives of successful learning across cultures. I want to develop a theoretical model for a new pedagogy - a way of inciting a revolution of status, from student to learner and from teacher to facilitator. The ideas in this paper may provide the theoretical

foundation I need to support my practices as a facilitator of others' learning in the future.

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